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“COLD BEADS OF HISTORY AND HOME”¹: FICTIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE NORTHERN IRISH TROUBLES

This essay explores several novels by contemporary Northern Irish writers with an eye to assessing how The Troubles are represented in their pages. Some of the more recent writings concerned with the conflict and its aftermath (i.e. those published over the last 25 years) may seem to be quite detached and even ironic or parodic but on closer inspection the use of the postmodern distancing devices in those works – paradoxically – proves to testify to a profound emotional commitment on the part of all the narrators involved in reminiscing about the Troubles.

KEYWORDS: the Troubles, history, fiction, perspective, Northern Ireland

“Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?”
(H. White 1987: 25)

Reading about the Troubles in Northern Ireland is an epistemologically challenging experience. The Troubles, the period of severe antagonism and sectarian violence in Ulster which lasted three decades (roughly between 1968 and 1998), constituted the longest running conflict in contemporary Western Europe (see Cleary 2002: 98). What percolated its way through to the public outside Northern Ireland, however, was a heavily sanitized and not infrequently singularly misleading narrative of the protests, civil rights marches, disturbances, assassinations, hunger strikes, bombings and other modes of internecine strife. Using the media at their disposal, Westminster and Whitehall did their best to create the impression that the conflict was contained and confined to the six counties of the North of Ireland (see Coulter 1999: 182) and yet republican paramilitary groups managed to advertize their own agenda all over the world by bombing locations in England (including London) and even staging an unsuccessful attempt at Margaret Thatcher's life at the Grand Hotel in Brighton in 1984. They had a different story to tell, one in which the Catholic minority was

¹ Heaney 1998: 62.

oppressed and discriminated against, and the province was a typical colonial site where the native population was exploited by the British Empire and its loyal servants. As a consequence, there have been at least two basic, fundamentally opposed and mutually exclusive versions of recent events in Ulster. Paradoxically, the past, which is still close at hand, in the living memory of the people who partook in those events, is not available in the form of uncontested facts. Instead, we are left with a plurality of competing narratives which vie for the imagination of those who take an interest in Northern Ireland and its complicated history.

In what follows I do not intend to reconstruct the past the way most historians would embark on their job; instead I choose several novels by contemporary Northern Irish writers in order to take a closer look at how the recent history of the Province is represented in their pages. I accept as inevitable the fact that those writers view the past in a variety of irreconcilable manners. Northern Irish fiction both invites and celebrates a heterogeneity of perspectives on the past, thereby attesting to the claim that the only access we have to history is through its personalized, biased, idiosyncratic versions, which, to cap it all, can never be taken at face value. After all, fiction is not encumbered by any aspirations to delve into the truth about the past. Instead, it is free to interpret history according to the points of view chosen by particular writers. As a consequence, the conflict in Northern Ireland has no single history; it has only stories written from varying perspectives, accounts whose epistemological status is tantamount to that of an artistic testimony. Still, according to Richard Klein (2007: 4), historical fictions “have the power to address the past on psychic, emotive, even spiritual levels that may effect, from within, a change of contemporary cultural sensibilities.” This is exactly what all the writings I discuss here have in common: they are remarkably capable of addressing unresolved issues in the hope of increasing our scope for understanding each other.

The idea of approaching the Troubles through fiction is consonant with a well-established critical position (known as New Historicism) which assumes that works of literature are also cultural documents and as such they bear witness to how people have felt about particular historical events. Since the High Middle Ages, as Jeff Riggenbach asserts (2009: 21), Western history has extensively relied on the written word rather than any other source, and historical fiction fits the bill here, although its evidence is not immediately available and usually requires an interpretive methodology. Major inspiration for that methodology may be found in Hayden White’s writings and, to a certain extent, in Linda Hutcheon’s notion of historiographic metafiction (see Carroll 2011). Namely, in my discussion of Northern Irish novels, I endorse White’s argument that real events do not present themselves to perception in the form of well-made narratives, therefore historiography always, and necessarily, must resort to strategies of representation borrowed from literary discourse (see White 1987: 25). Real events do not simply speak themselves and that is why they cannot tell their own story; someone else must do that for them. In his brilliant discussion of Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* White argues that historians and writers should

work hand in hand in making the past available to us. Historians, by themselves, are capable of telling us, haltingly, a few often unrelated things about what actually happened in the past; imaginative writers of historical fiction are capable of seamlessly interweaving the true with the possible and thus conjuring up what White describes as "a compelling image of a cosmos" (2005: 149). In other words, our holistic images of the past are by definition founded on the exercise of rhetoric because the notion that historiography may offer us 'pure' (read: unadulterated by its recourse to literary techniques) representations is a mere illusion.

Linda Hutcheon's discussion of history and postmodern fiction in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* is clearly indebted to White's position. First of all, she emphasizes the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge in the present (1988: 92), which puts her squarely in the same camp with White. Furthermore, she notes that history and fiction have always been "notoriously porous genres" (1988: 206). And yet it is the postmodernist paradigm that has programmatically decided to exploit the consequences of their problematic cohabitation: the emergence of what Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction has brought matters to a head and forced critics to refute "the view that only history has a truth claim" (1988: 93). Historiographic metafiction, which Hutcheon seems to identify with postmodern fiction in general, problematizes the very grounding of historical knowledge. By applying this category we can easily group together much Northern Irish writing about the Troubles, and indeed most of the defining qualities of historiographic metafiction will be found in the novels which I discuss further on. In some of them, though, it may be difficult to detect a playful attitude to the past which is implied by Hutcheon's insistence on the employment of distancing devices (including irony and parody) as constitutive of postmodern literature. That is why throughout this essay I use a less spectacular notion of Troubles fiction to classify the kind of writing that raises political and social issues connected with the recent history of Northern Ireland.

In my overall perspective on Troubles fiction, I follow closely in the footsteps of the magisterial study by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews titled *Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969: (de-)constructing the North*. Kennedy-Andrews proposes an eclectic view of the Northern Irish novel, though his eclecticism seems to be mostly confined to various aspects of postmodernism. Apropos of history, he quotes Seamus Deane's assertion that reading is never innocent and "[t]here is no such thing as objective history, and there is no innocent history. All history and literature ... are forms of mythology" (2003: 10). In this context, mythology is synonymous with a deeply ingrained ideology which members of a given community are usually blind to. Inevitably, by choosing to focus on history, one decides to engage in questions of ideological, political, and even ethnoreligious scissions in Northern Ireland. Even though it is a well-trodden path, and some critics are skeptical of the overriding significance of social issues in discussions of modern Irish literature (see Taynor 2002: 125), what distinguishes my approach is that it is concerned with exploring the sheer variety of the artistic modes of representing the conflict in fiction. More specifically,

I want to assess the consequences of deploying perspectivism on two basic levels of representation. First of all, I want to juxtapose several different novels by both Catholic and Protestant writers to see how their narrators look at the recent history of Ulster. Secondly, I am interested in those works of fiction which problematize the issue of perspective as such – e.g. by introducing several disparate focalizers and such distancing devices as irony, parody, intertextuality and satire.

The writings that I will use as a quarry for quotations and illustrations come from what many critics of Northern Irish literature identify as a period of the enthusiastic embrace of postmodernist techniques (see Patten 1995: 129; Pelaschiar 2009: 52-53; Kennedy-Andrews 2003: 8-9). In comparison, earlier fiction about the Troubles was markedly realist, conventional, and singularly unadventurous in its formal aspects. Neil Corcoran is surprised that Northern Irish literature abandoned the realist mode at all in order to produce what he calls a “more experimental” (1997: 157) kind of writing. The fact remains that it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that the North finally welcomed typically postmodern representations of the conflict. This belated introduction of formal experimentation to Northern Irish fiction may be due to the persistence of what I elsewhere called post-traumatic realism, a special brand of realism which is particularly sensitive to historical upheavals and their ramifications for individual characters represented in modern Irish novels (see Drong 2013: 19-36). Besides, when the shift in literary vogues and techniques did occur in Northern Ireland, it certainly was not a case of blanket transformation, since conventional realist novels have continued to be written till the present day alongside more formally complex works of fiction. In this essay, however, I choose to discuss those writings which, both formally and thematically, seem to be preoccupied with the notion of perspective. Furthermore, their special advantage for my purposes lies in the fact that all those novels approach the conflict from a certain epistemological distance, as already converted into historical material which writers are free to deploy in their fiction.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

For the sake of clarity I organize my discussion of Northern Irish fiction published since the late 1980s into three categories: geographical locations, historical events and, finally, themes and attitudes. The first category will comprise the geographical settings which have been represented in literary discourse, with Belfast as the most prominent locale of the conflict between Protestants and Catholics. The second category will include artistic representations of the actual historical events which constitute landmarks in the chronology of the Troubles. And ultimately, the most capacious category will be preoccupied with the themes and attitudes typically associated with the conflict. In most cases I am going to compare literary visions

of the Troubles found in several different novels; their juxtaposition will hopefully yield a multifaceted panorama of a historical period filtered through the artistic imagination of some of the most accomplished writers from Northern Ireland.

Belfast is the chief protagonist of *Eureka Street* by Robert McLiam Wilson. Kennedy-Andrews, to convey Wilson's vision of the city in the novel, uses such terms as 'panoptic,' 'panchronic' and 'rhapsodic' (2003: 190). Simultaneously, the city is one of the most troubling *topoi* of all Troubles fiction. In the initial pages of his novel, Wilson compares Belfast to Beirut, Saigon, Agincourt and Anzio. What it shares with the above mentioned locations is obviously the intense scarification of its cityscape brought about by large-scale hostilities. However, unlike the Belfast in *Resurrection Man*, in which McNamee has one of his characters identify the city as a human body possessed of a heart and about to die (images of a dead or dying city are particularly pervasive throughout the novel), Wilson's Belfast is markedly textualized: "The city is a repository of narratives, of stories. Present tense, past tense or future. The city is a novel" (1998a: 215). This is not to say that Belfast is never anthropomorphized in *Eureka Street*; far from that. And yet at many points Wilson is at pains to keep his narrator from identifying too closely with the narrative of the city by having him remind the reader (and himself) that his own Belfast is just a fiction.² It is not by accident that Wilson has one of his major characters live in Poetry Street.

In Wilson's debut novel, *Ripley Bogle*, Belfast is made directly responsible for the Troubles as such. First of all, the eponymous Ripley blames his personal misfortunes on his home town, very much like Tristram Shandy who blames the accident of his infelicitous birth (and whatever follows) on a personification of Fortune. By delivering the hyperbolic verdict that "[i]t's all Belfast's fault" (1998b: 38), he acknowledges his own impotence in the face of his personal and national history. Ripley's resentment is an immediate consequence of his childish refusal to accept the fact that he is Irish by dint of being born in Belfast; eventually, by leaving Northern Ireland and settling down in England he makes a point of defying the genetic and cultural burden imposed on him by his origins. Still, he remains a Belfast guy, and the contents of his outpourings, which take up the entire novel, imply Ripley's profound emotional attachment to the city in which he grew up. His pushing the blame for his own failures onto Belfast is a futile and infantile gesture, a testimony to being overpowered by his own sense of guilt.

Belfast as a city of violence, destruction, and hostility is an image culturally inculcated in the minds of its inhabitants even if the actual city – or at least some parts of it – departs from its stereotyped representations. In *One by One in the Darkness* by Deirdre Madden, David, a friend of one of the narrators and protagonists, has a partner by the name of Steve, who lives in London. David is ashamed of the early 1990s Belfast and afraid that his home town may ruin their relationship. That

² Interestingly, aestheticization of the city in the novel does not mean that it ceases to be a politicized space. See Alexander 2007: 29.

is why he does not want to invite Steve to Belfast; in a conversation with Helen he rehearses all his misgivings: "What if he hates it? Seeing soldiers all over the place and the barracks all fortified and stuff; that's going to frighten the life out of him. And what if anything happens? I mean, what if a bomb goes off, or the car gets hijacked or something?" (1997: 56). On Helen's advice, David makes sure that nothing happens by carefully selecting the sights to see and confining Steve's experience of Belfast to what anyone would find attractive and tranquil. The plan backfires, however, because Steve is so fascinated by Belfast that he wants to come and live permanently in the city. Therefore, on Steve's second visit, David, who is not particularly keen on a long-term relationship, again carefully chooses what he wants to show his partner. This time Steve's experience of Belfast includes the Falls road, some heavily fortified barracks, West Belfast and its Republican murals and then the Shankill, the Loyalist murals, and finally Milltown Cemetery with its IRA graves. It is like taking two different theme trips of the city: the first one advertizes a dynamic, ruggedly beautiful and resilient metropolis, while the other wallows in its troubled history, suffering and unresolved conflicts. Ironically, after the second visit Steve still insists on settling down in Belfast.

Another image of Belfast comes from the already mentioned *Resurrection Man* by Eoin McNamee. Its plot is set in the late 1960s and early 1970s so Belfast is presented there in the early stages of the Troubles. The first description of the city aspires to narratorial neutrality, unlike many others, which are presented from one of the characters' point of view. Curiously, McNamee's non-participant narrator seems to be captivated by the music of Belfast's street names, which become empty signifiers, derelict monuments to its past colonial glory:

The city itself has withdrawn into its placenames. Palestine Street. Balaklava Street. The names of captured ports, lost battles, forgotten outposts held against inner darkness. There is a sense of collapsed trade and accumulate decline. In its names alone the city holds commerce with itself, a furtive levying of tariffs in the shadow.

(2004: 3-4)

The street names have lost their original splendor; now their meanings are either forgotten or ironically dislocated. What used to be a bustling city is now a declining outpost of the Empire, a colonial port where darkness has come to reign supreme. The Conradian idiom implies a cyclicity of history: what at first used to be one of the dark places of the earth then enjoyed a brief spell of prosperity but now has again been absorbed by darkness. Throughout *Resurrection Man*, descriptions of Belfast convey a sense of overwhelming emptiness, largely because the crucial events of the plot occur when the streets are almost completely depopulated after dark.

Unlike the Belfast novels mentioned above, *Bog Child* by Siobhan Dowd is set close to the border with the Republic of Ireland. In the narrative, the border acquires a symbolic significance as a location redolent with divisions and transgressions. The intertextual dimension of the novel is clearly defined by its title, which is

reminiscent of Peter Glob's work, *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*, about the discovery of perfectly preserved bodies of ancient people in Jutland. Interestingly, Glob's work also inspired much of Seamus Heaney's poetry, including "The Punishment," a poem whose first part describes the remains of a young girl who was probably ritually killed for committing adultery. A similar body is found in *Bog Child*, and its discovery is closely connected with a transgression of another kind: Fergus and his uncle cross the border between The South and the North to steal peat which is a very valuable fuel (see Dowd 2009: 3-12). Fergus practices running a lot, so he has an opportunity to cross the border on many other occasions, too. He is involved in a small-time scheme which, he is led to believe, implicates him in a criminal activity to do with the IRA. Each time he crosses the border, he has to pass by a checkpoint with a young soldier who originally hails from Wales. They strike a comradeship, which implies a transgression from the republican point of view. Still, the border brings them together as friends, and they even discover that their religious differences are of minor significance. This idyllic representation of a purely nominal border, however, is soon shattered by a bomb which kills the young soldier. Ostensibly, only by crossing more substantial borders, that is, by leaving Ireland altogether, can Fergus liberate himself from the conflict.

Relatively few Northern Irish novels are set in small-town or non-urban areas. *One by One in the Darkness* is an interesting exception to this rule although some episodes of the novel still take place in Belfast. Otherwise, the story is set on a small farm and it is concerned with a week in the lives of four women who reminisce about their family. The pivotal event in the entire narrative takes place when Charlie, their husband and father, is killed by Protestant paramilitaries who mistake him for his brother, supposedly associated with the IRA. The assassination casts a long shadow over each woman's life but the truth is that, in comparison with the sectarian animosities in Belfast and Derry, it is an isolated act of violence in an environment which is not directly exposed to the Troubles. This is not say that sectarian tensions are completely absent from their place: discrimination against Catholics is a commonly acknowledged fact and their growing political awareness makes some members of the family join the civil rights marches in nearby locations. Although no bombs explode outside their house, when Kate forgets her schoolbag in a shop in town and comes back home without it, a security alert is necessary, which makes her conclude, rather hyperbolically,³ that "[p]eople are getting killed all the time, there is bombs and everything" (Madden 1997: 135). In point of fact, her father is the only casualty of the conflict that she comes face to face, and then it is a case of mistaken identities. From the entire family's perspective, however, it is a huge tragedy and in this sense the Troubles affect each and every one of them.

³ Alex Houen makes a pertinent point in the context of his discussion of 9/11 in the USA. He claims that "the terrifying reality of the events could only be experienced and expressed as *hyperbole* – as surpassing the normal limits of experience and expression." See 2002: 2.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

What clearly transpires from *One by One in the Darkness* is that a radical polarization of the sectarian positions in local communities was a result, rather than a cause, of the large-scale historical events which inspired the civil-rights movement in Northern Ireland. Since the beginning of the civil-rights marches in 1968, Catholics embraced the idea of social and political emancipation with particular zest and Protestants felt compelled to respond in kind although it is fair to acknowledge that they had organized, largely undisturbed, their July 12th marches long before the onset of the Troubles. One way or another, it was towards the end of the 1960s that ethnoreligious divisions were thrown into sharp relief. As Fay, Morrissey and Smyth point out (1999: 58), “[t]he eruption of violence on the streets, and the wholesale movement of population in urban areas into separate communities of Protestant and Catholic, led to the formation of local vigilantes that in turn ultimately contributed to the resurgence of paramilitaries in local communities.” The violence during the marches, including an oblique reference to the Bloody Sunday in Derry on January 30, 1972, is present indirectly in *One by One in the Darkness*, rather heard of than witnessed personally by any of the women-narrators. Still, Emily has no difficulty recollecting Orange marches she saw as a child, and the impression of being hated by the Protestant community continues to haunt her memory. Her daughters, in turn, do not think twice when they have an opportunity to participate in one of the early civil-rights marches (in Derry on 5 October 1968). All in all, what is conspicuously absent from the early stages of the civil-rights movement in Northern Ireland as described in *One by One in the Darkness* is the religious context: the marches are meant to peacefully challenge inequality and discrimination alone.

The same period is presented from a Protestant perspective in *Burning Your Own* by Glenn Patterson. Originally, before the civil-rights marches, the Protestant and Catholic inhabitants of the Larkview estate coexist rather peacefully, the only self-appointed social outcast being Francy Hagan, who is distinguished from other characters by the possession of some peculiar, quasi-mystical and shamanic qualities (see Corcoran 1997: 161). His ultimate self-immolation seems to imply Patterson’s critique of the suicidal tendencies in the Catholic community, or, viewed from a different angle, it may indicate a high degree of (un)quiet desperation on their part. Larkview is relatively isolated from the main hostilities in Belfast (e.g. a Protestant parade being stoned up the Shankill) but it too receives a fair share of violence and its Protestant community is clearly critical of the unrest inspired by the Catholic marches and protests. For example, Simon, the protagonist’s uncle, airs his frustration in response to a TV programme which hosts Bernadette Devlin, a key civil-rights activist at that time (see Patterson 1989: 112). Even the ten-year-old Mal is aware that sectarian animosities can no longer be brushed under the carpet: “But it was no kind of togetherness really. Whatever didn’t fit in, got excluded; that’s what it

boiled down to. ... [J]ust ignoring things didn't make them go away" (1989: 201). Mal realizes that violence is likely to escalate; when he hears about the riots in the Bogside he has no doubts that members of his own community want to go to Derry to fight against the Catholics (the official euphemism – "help the police" – is not lost on the boy) rather than talk sense to them (see 1989: 213).

In August 1971 the Northern Irish government decided to put an end to the growing unrest in the Province by arresting the leaders of the Catholic paramilitary groups (mostly the Provisional IRA and Official IRA) without trial. The Internment Night, officially known as Operation Demetrius, resulted in detaining 342 people and the deaths of four who either resisted arrest or took part in the operation as soldiers (see Fay, Morrissey and Smyth 1999: 26). In *Ripley Bogle* and *One by One in the Darkness* we get two markedly different representations of the event although in both cases August 1971 is described from a child's perspective. Ripley and Helen remember the same night and yet the tenors of their reminiscences vary considerably. Wilson's protagonist is elated by the events whose political significance is completely beyond his comprehension. This is how he describes an unannounced visit which British soldiers pay to his working-class Catholic (and, accordingly, suspicious by definition) home on the Internment Night:

Imagine my amazement and joy when I beheld a massive West Indian corporal standing at my bedroom door brandishing a large automatic rifle. My untutored blood raced with elation. I had never seen a real black man before and now I had one standing, albeit rather sheepishly, in my own tiny and familiar bedroom. Boy, was I chuffed or what!

(1998b: 33)

Ripley's account is replete with political irony, as the British soldier is supposed to act the part of the colonizer who brings to heel a subaltern subject of Her Majesty and yet the soldier himself comes from a former colony of the Empire and acts "sheepishly." Ripley, in turn, is not supposed to enjoy the disciplinary measures imposed on the Catholics in Northern Ireland; still, in the next episode, the boy finds the drama which unfolds outside his house immensely engrossing. In retrospect, he explains his attitude to the Troubles in the following terms: "Murder, violence, blood, guts and sundry other features of Irish political life tend to telescope one's development as you can imagine. You zip along to cynicism – blink and you'd miss it" (1998b: 32). Whether his cynicism is a way of opting out of history altogether – an intention which he declares at the very outset of his narrative (1998b: 9) – or a psychological strategy of dealing with stress, resentment and anger remains an open question.

Helen from *One by One in the Darkness* learns about the events of the Internment Night *post factum*. She visits her uncles, Peter and Brian, who have just been released from prison and haltingly describe the treatment they received from the British soldiers. Her uncles mince their words but their disheveled appearance clearly testifies to the violence of their oppressors. Helen's vivid imagination provides

an image of their internment which has a powerful emotional impact on the girl: "She saw Peter being dragged out of an army jeep, being sworn at and kicked, she saw soldiers scream abuse in his face, saw them twist his arms up behind his back until he cried out. ... Helen felt a terrible anger now too, an anger she would never forget" (Madden 1997: 103). Although she may be ignorant of the overall political import of the events in Northern Ireland, the girl realizes that something very serious has happened to her family, and the sense of injustice she experiences on that day makes her choose the career of a lawyer in the future.

Another crucial event in the history of the Troubles that finds its representation in the pages of Northern Irish fiction is the Hunger Strike of 1981. What happened that year constituted the most spectacular manifestation of the Republicans' persistence in their struggle for being recognized as political prisoners in Long Kesh, the notorious detention center converted into a prison from a RAF station in 1971. The protests in Long Kesh started in 1976 when many Republicans who were detained there decided to join the blanket strike and then, in 1978, the no-wash protest but the media all over the world were eventually electrified by the deaths of ten hunger strikers, including their leader, Bobby Sands, in 1981 (see Fay, Morrissey and Smyth 1999: 31-34). In *The Truth Commissioner*, Francis Gilroy's character acquires depth and authenticity due to his Republican paramilitary past, which involves a prison experience in the 1970s. Following the Good Friday Agreement, Gilroy is now a minister in the Northern Irish government but, whether he likes it or not, the memories of the Troubles are still with him when he showers in his modern, comfortable home: "he thinks of Ricky and himself on the blanket in a shit-smeared cell and the moment when the warders used the hoses to wash them down. He closes his eyes as if to blank out the memory and lets the water's full force hit the crown of his head, holding his hand like a visor over his eyes. Shading the water, shading what you do not want to remember" (Park 2009: 79). The Troubles may be in the past but their memory will linger on and, uninvited, revisit those who witnessed their atrocities. Gilroy does realize that sooner or later his involvement with the IRA will catch up with him and erode the appearance of his present equanimity.

THEMES AND ATTITUDES

What is certainly representative of Troubles fiction is the theme of sectarian violence, and it does not really make much difference whether the modes of its representation are typically postmodern or conservatively realistic. McNamee's *Resurrection Man* stands out in this respect as a novel which seems to lose its ethical bearings, what with "its refusal of explicit human sympathy, its mechanistic psychology and choreographed horror, its relentless detailing of mutilation and murder" (Kennedy-Andrews 2006: 99). Its central character, Victor, clearly wallows

in the crimes he commits; the impression that the narrator condones the atrocities perpetrated by the psychopath may result from the fact that McNamee filters substantial parts of the narrative through Victor's point of view. It is worth noting that Victor's violence is not necessarily motivated by ethnoreligious factors. After all, he does not mind mutilating and killing his fellow Protestants when he suspects them of betraying him. *Resurrection Man* is thus more than just a novel about the Troubles: it is a study in human cruelty and deviance set against the backdrop of a period in which sectarian bigotry becomes a useful excuse for giving a free rein to one's pathological inclinations. The early 1970s are an apocalyptic time in the novel, a time when justice is perverted and controlled by people like McClure, whose aims and designs are diabolical and unpredictable.

In most Troubles novels there are passages and episodes which fulfil the capacious definition of violence offered by Patrick Grant in his book *Literature, Rhetoric and Violence in Ireland, 1968-1998*. Grant assumes that violence "occurs whenever another human being is treated as an object or thing, rather than as a person able to give consent or to refuse to enter into a discourse or relationship" (2001: 3). In fact, *Ripley Bogle* by Wilson abounds in descriptions of sectarian hostilities which seem to surpass Grant's definition. One of the most shocking examples of violence is narrated with an ear to satire and the grotesque, strategies common to much postmodern writing about the Troubles (see Kennedy-Andrews 2006: 106). Ripley's account involves two of his schoolmates who make the mistake of entering the wrong neighborhood, a contested territory where dangerous things are known to have happened to both Catholics and Protestants. Predictably, three heavily armed men approach them from out of nowhere:

As you can imagine, our two heroes fairly wet themselves with terror. This is it, they think hysterically. Hello bullet, bye-bye life! The guntoting vigilantes ask our boys whether they are Catholics or Protestants. Here is a tiny, breathless whiff of a chance. A microscopic escape clause. Catholic or Protestant. Has to be right first time. There will be no runner-up award. Our boys ponder madly. There are no locational hints and the gunmen are giving no clues. One of the boys tosses a mental coin and fearfully hazards the fact that they are Catholics.

(Wilson 1998b: 191)

The boys are asked to prove it by reciting the Hail Mary, which they do immediately, relieved and reassured. Once they are done, they are both shot in the head. Interestingly, what transpires from Ripley's own account of the event is that he is first and foremost fascinated by the perverse cleverness of the assassins: "Dontcha just love that?! The bastards actually made sure. They fucking checked! The perfect, cyclical cruelty of that moment of hope and sanguine prayer. The heartless artistry of that pause of glad incantation" (1998b: 191). Far from merely aestheticising violence, he has to fall back on irony to distance himself from the story and thus render it less realistic. In other words, the story must become

a fantastic urban legend to yield to narration by a character who is forced to live in the grotesquely inhumane world of the Troubles.

The collocation of violence with religious bigotry is a bit of cliché when we describe one of the most pervasive themes of the Troubles. In fact, violence as such is quite common in the fictional representations of the conflict but it is not necessarily motivated by ethnoreligious impulses. In several Troubles novels, threats, cruelty and violence are directed at members of one's own community – either as a form of tribal revenge for treachery or as a disciplinary measure meant to test and ensure people's loyalty and devotion to the cause. In *One by One in the Darkness*, the British soldiers, who are supposed to protect Catholics against Protestant paramilitary groups, are refused to be served by local Catholic shops. Mrs. McGovern, a shopkeeper, explains her problem to Kate and her father: "I don't want to antagonise the army, but by the same token, there's men in this country and if they thought I was serving soldiers they wouldn't leave me with one stone on top of the other of either house or shop" (Madden 1997: 99). What is striking about this situation is not that Catholic shopkeepers decide to send a 'you're not welcome' message to the British soldiers but that they are threatened and effectively forced to do so by paramilitary organizations which claim to defend the Catholic community's interests. Clearly, on her own, Mrs. McGovern does not feel it necessary to advertise her sectarian allegiances by hurting her business.

Violence against one's own people is inextricably connected with ritual punishments for consorting with the enemy. Tarring and feathering women who are accused of dating males of the other community (especially British soldiers) are a common *topos* in Northern Irish literature. In *Ripley Bogle*, the narrator, merely a boy at the time, realizes that tarring and feathering a girl from his neighborhood who is discovered to have had an affair with a corporal from the Royal Engineers involve a fair amount of barbaric cruelty: "Some patriotic youngbloods decided on punitive action. They nabbed young Mary and tied her to a lamp post at the bottom of our cul-de-sac. They stripped her and shaved her head. To my surprise I wasn't enjoying it at all. ... The bastards actually boiled the tar in front of her. Even I could see that this was undiplomatic" (1998b: 112). Ripley's use of euphemism to convey his response contrasts sharply with a detailed description of the procedure, which no one is bold enough to disrupt. Finally, Ripley's father summons the courage to put a stop to the obnoxious spectacle but then the price he has to pay for defying one of the young Provies is his own life.

Interestingly, the same kind of ritualistic air surrounds punishments of Protestant girls. They are also tarred and feathered by Loyalist militaries, or simply by their own folk, who treat the whole issue as a matter of custom and tradition. In *Resurrection Man*, Victor watches TV news which shows Catholic women who have been subjected to the procedure. Most likely, the footage is supposed to evoke disgust and righteous indignation on the part of the civilized Protestant viewership but Victor recalls that his own people used to punish girls in exactly the same

manner: "He remembered having seen it happen in the Village to a girl who was engaged to a Catholic. The women had shaved the girl's head indoors while the men stood around outside with the tar and feathers, smoking and chatting. It seemed a form of initiation prescribed by custom" (McNamee 2004: 51). Rather than righteous indignation, the punishment meets with general approval of the community. The people seem to be blind to the violence and humiliation which are an essential part of the ritual the girl is forced to undergo in the course of a tribal retribution for what few other communities in the globe would recognize as a major transgression. Evidently, the Troubles, as a period of the destabilization of ethical norms in Ulster, seem to encourage cruelty against the weak and the defenseless on both sides of the fence.

Pathological cruelty and an almost grotesque, Tarantino-like quality of violence are portrayed in *Eureka Street* and *Resurrection Man*. In the former, the narrator seems so shell-shocked by an explosion in Fountain Street that all he is capable of doing at first is inventorying, with "forensic calm" (Kennedy-Andrews 2003: 193), the damage to human flesh and the property which was affected by the blast. In an attempt to suppress any emotional engagement with the event (a mock-journalistic attitude, no doubt), he distances himself from the casualties and yet by ironically trying to justify the terrorists he makes sure that his readers can sense the emotional overtones of his account. Wryly, he blames the actual casualties and their families for their failure to understand why the bombing was necessary:

One can excuse much of this by their surprise and some of the immediate physical distress attendant upon such an event, but the more consistent refusal of some to listen to reason or explanation is perhaps harder to fathom. Maybe, at such times, many people simply refuse to read between the lines. Maybe they believe the lies that their eyes tell them. For the men who planted the bomb knew it wasn't their fault. It was the fault of their enemies, the oppressors who would not do what they wanted them to do.

(Wilson 1998a: 227-228)

The failure to understand this inexorable logic bespeaks "an inappropriate gift for empathy" (1998a: 229) in those who pity the casualties and blame the IRA. One has to act on misguided presumptions about the Troubles to wonder "why anyone who might want the British to leave the Irish alone would announce this by killing Irish people" (1998a: 227). Throughout this chapter, and elsewhere too, Wilson's narrator's mock-objectivity proves that the use of postmodern techniques (most prominently irony) in fiction may be a perfect vehicle for conveying powerful moral sentiments as well.

Victor's men in *Resurrection Man* (based on actual events) are like the characters in *Reservoir Dogs* when they descend upon a Catholic pub and shoot everyone in sight in retaliation for the IRA's murdering two Protestants at a filling station the same day. When they ready themselves for the operation, they quote Nancy Sinatra's "Bang, bang." Then, under the influence of amphetamine, Victor asserts

his leadership and leads his men into action. Soon the floor of the Shamrock bar is strewn with corpses; one, final victim falls, tumbling down the stairs in what the gunmen appreciate as “a graceful, cinematic manner” (McNamee 2004: 140). Once they are back, they are greeted by McClure, the brains of the operation, who acknowledges that he timed it in such a way that the massacre should make the last news of the day. What they are also glad to hear on their return is that they are “like heroes from a film with John Wayne” – “[m]en in streaming yellow oilskins and exhausted expressions who have saved their community from an insane natural force of flood or landslide” (2004: 141). This is their way of rationalizing the slaughter they have just perpetrated, a way of turning a cruel and unnecessary bloodshed into an epic achievement they can be proud of. The cinematic imagery introduced by McNamee’s narrator is, in turn, a way of demonstrating how far those terrorists are removed from reality.

Although Troubles fiction does contain ethnoreligious and gender stereotypes, what many Northern Irish writers do is exposing those stereotypes to criticism and ridicule. *Ripley Bogle* will again serve as a good illustration of this tendency, this time in the context of nationalism. According to Ripley, Northern Irish nationalism is virtually synonymous with Catholicism. His tongue-in-cheek description of his best friend’s whole-hearted devotion to the nationalist cause includes, as a matter of course, an assertion of his deep Catholic sentiment (“Maurice was a major Catholic. He was practically papal.” Wilson 1998b: 100). It is obvious that Maurice is the kind of person who would never appreciate the historical irony of Irish nationalism’s being invented by Protestants (see Gkotsaridis 2006: 159). That is why, when he is described as being “capable of the most bewildering stupidity and barbarism in his support of Catholic Celticism” (Wilson 1998b: 100), it is safe to conclude that the oxymoronic combination (Catholic Celticism) is a way of poking fun at the inflated models of republican/nationalist subjectivity. There is an additional irony in this fictional representation of the ‘essential’ characteristics of true Irishmen: Ripley Bogle eventually confesses to telling lies in the course of his narrative, so his reliability, and the reliability of his entire representation of Northern Ireland, is put into question. Ultimately, the stereotyped attitudes we can find in Troubles fiction are fictions themselves – part truths and part inventions, they may be cognitively useful simplifications or, in some cases, artistic refinements of reality but, as fictions, they will always, necessarily, remain only more or less successful approximations of the actual, complex, heterogeneous experience of the Troubles.

Fictional representations of the Troubles published over the last twenty five years share a critical perspective on the past. Polyvocal, multifaceted and discordant as they are, those novels converge on one crucial point: the conflict in Northern Ireland should be transformed into a narrative of both mourning and warning. Some writers choose to employ a satirical mode to do so (most notably Wilson); others prefer to resort to psychological realism (e.g. Madden), but they all offer their accounts of the Troubles as an emotional and emotive critique. The effectiveness

of their narratives rests on what Robert Garratt calls "the protean nature of history" (2006: 73), its malleability and performativity. The Troubles novels, by restaging history, are capable of rewriting it, at least on the emotional level. Far from claiming that the past as such is modified in the pages of Northern Irish fiction, what I have argued is that fictional perspectives on what happened during the conflict complement historiographic accounts of the Troubles and perform a future-oriented function. They affect our attitudes to the past and thus, hopefully, immunize us against any further sectarian violence and antagonisms by increasing the scope our imagination and making us sensitive to the suffering of others.

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